

Building on what remains

—"Don't be so naive."

Est

Three weeks had become two weeks.

Two weeks had become ten days.

And somehow, in the mathematics of avoidance, ten days had become this morning —me sitting at my desk at 7 AM, staring at an email I still hadn't answered, while the Bangkok dawn painted my apartment in shades of gold and amber.

The brief from Nut sat in my inbox like a live grenade. I'd read it approximately forty-seven times, not that I was counting, memorized the itinerary: Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and done extensive research on the group I'd be photographing, massive, talented, the kind of assignment that could catapult a career into an entirely different stratosphere.

I'd also done absolutely nothing about it.

Every time I opened the email with the intention of responding—of saying yes, or no, or please give me more time because I'm drowning in indecision—something stopped me. My fingers would hover over the keyboard, and then I'd find myself closing the laptop and doing something else. Editing photos. Making coffee. Staring at the resurrection plant like it might offer botanical wisdom about life choices.

The plant, unhelpfully, just kept being green.

My phone buzzed. I reached for it with the desperate gratitude of someone being offered a distraction from their own thoughts.

Tui: [Image attached]

I opened the attachment and found myself smiling despite everything.

The photo showed Tui and Lego at what appeared to be an amusement park. They were both wearing character ears—some kind of cartoon animal I didn't recognize, possibly a bear or a very round dog—and matching t-shirts that said something I couldn't quite read. Lego's knee brace was visible beneath his shorts, but he was grinning so widely it was clear the injury hadn't dampened his enthusiasm for roller coasters. Tui's expression was softer, more bemused, the particular look of someone who had been dragged somewhere they didn't want to go and was now having a suspiciously good time.

Tui: Lego insisted on the ears. I have no explanation for the shirts.

Tui: The shirts were his idea too.

Tui: I'm being held emotionally hostage by a boyfriend with excellent taste in matching outfits.

Est: You look happy.

Tui: I look ridiculous.

Est: Those aren't mutually exclusive.

Tui: Point taken.

Tui: How are you? Still breathing over there?

The question landed harder than it should have. Still breathing. Such a simple metric for wellness, and yet some days it felt like an accomplishment.

Est: Breathing. Working. The usual.

Tui: That's very vague. Should I be concerned?

Est: No more than usual.

Tui: That's not reassuring.

Est: Nothing about me is reassuring. It's part of my charm.

I set down the phone before he could probe further. Tui knew me too well—had known me through every crisis and recovery of my adult life. If I let the conversation continue, he'd sense that something was wrong. He'd ask questions. And I wasn't ready to answer questions about an opportunity I couldn't even answer for myself.

The email sat in my inbox, waiting.

Ten days.

The other email—the one from the gallery—was easier to deal with. Which was ironic, since a month ago it had felt like the most significant opportunity of my career.

Subject: Re: Exhibition Inquiry - Est Sangaworawong

I read through their latest message, which outlined proposed dates, space allocation, and the specific photographs they wanted to feature. All documentation work from "Absence & Light." All images of William's paintings, William's exhibition, William's grief made visible. It was flattering. It was professional recognition of the highest order. And it felt wrong.

I typed my response:

Dear Gallery Team,

Thank you for your continued interest in my work and for the detailed exhibition proposal. I've given this opportunity considerable thought, and I'm honored by your confidence in my documentation of "Absence & Light."

However, I've decided to decline this particular exhibition.

My hope is that when I eventually exhibit my own work, it will be a collection that represents my complete artistic vision—not just documentation of another artist's achievements, no matter how significant those achievements are. I want my first solo exhibition to be about my photography as its own language, not as a companion piece to someone else's story.

I hope this makes sense, and I hope we might work together in the future when I have a body of work that feels truly mine.

With gratitude,

Est

I read it three times, then hit send before I could second-guess myself.

The gallery exhibition would have been safe. Prestigious. A stepping stone built on William's success rather than my own. And maybe that was why it felt wrong—because I'd spent so long defining myself in relation to other people, finding my worth in how I served someone else's vision.

If I was going to have an exhibition, it would be mine. My eye. My choices. My story. Even if that story was still being written.

The gallery was more crowded than usual when I arrived that afternoon. I'd known there would be press—the exhibition was nearing its midpoint, and William's "return to the art world" narrative had proven irresistible to media outlets. But I hadn't expected this level of attention. Cameras everywhere. Journalists clustered in groups, their recorders ready. The particular energy of an Event rather than a simple gallery showing.

William was already there, surrounded by what appeared to be a small army of publicists and gallery staff. He looked—He looked tired.

Not the exhaustion I'd seen during the opening night, when the adrenaline of survival had carried him through. This was different. Deeper. The particular weariness of someone who had been performing for too long.

I raised my camera and started documenting, keeping my distance. Professional. Detached. Doing my job. But I couldn't stop noticing things. The way William's smile

didn't quite reach his eyes. The subtle tension in his shoulders that appeared every time a new journalist approached. The brief moments when his attention would drift toward the exit, as if calculating escape routes.

He was struggling. And he was hiding it from everyone except me.

A journalist I didn't recognize cornered him near the mother's portrait—the centerpiece of the exhibition, the most emotionally loaded piece in the collection.

"Mr. Jakrapatr, your work has been described as 'performative vulnerability.' How do you respond to critics who suggest you're exploiting your personal trauma for commercial gain?"

The question was a verbal grenade, designed to provoke a reaction. I saw William flinch—barely, almost imperceptibly—before his professional mask reasserted itself.

"I think the distinction between 'sharing' and 'exploiting' is often in the eye of the beholder," he said carefully. "My intention has always been honesty. What viewers do with that honesty is beyond my control."

"But the commercial success of the exhibition—the record-breaking sales—doesn't that suggest a certain commodification of grief?"

"It suggests that people respond to authentic emotion." William's voice was steady, but I could see his hands clenching at his sides. "I can't control the market. I can only control my intention. And my intention was to tell the truth about what I experienced."

"The truth about your mother's death?"

"The truth about grief. About isolation. About what it takes to come back from the edge."

Another journalist pushed forward, recorder extended. "There have been rumors about your personal life—specifically, about a romantic relationship that may have contributed to your breakdown. Can you comment?"

William went still. Completely, terrifyingly still.

"My personal life is not relevant to this exhibition," he said, and now there was ice in his voice. "If you have questions about the art, I'm happy to answer them. But my private relationships are exactly that—private."

The journalist pressed on. "But surely, as an artist who claims to value honesty, you'd want to—"

"I value honesty about my work. Not about the people I care about." William's mask was cracking. I could see it—the edges fraying, the composure threatening to

dissolve. "If you'll excuse me."

He turned and walked away, leaving the journalist mid-question, his exit just controlled enough to not seem like fleeing.

I lowered my camera and watched him go.

I found him in the back hallway, the same quiet corridor where we'd talked during the opening night. He was sitting on the floor—expensive suit and all—his back against the wall, his phone clutched in his hands. His face was illuminated by the screen, and whatever he was reading had drained all the color from his cheeks.

"William?"

He didn't look up. Didn't seem to hear me.

I moved closer, concern overriding professional distance.

"William. What happened?"

"There's a review." His voice was flat. Disconnected. "It came out this morning. I didn't see it until—one of the journalists quoted it at me. Thought I'd already read it."

"What does it say?"

He handed me the phone without answering.

I read the review. Then I read it again, my stomach sinking with each sentence.

"Absence & Light" has been heralded as the triumphant return of one of Thailand's most promising artists. But strip away the narrative of the "reclusive genius emerging from isolation," and what remains is considerably less impressive.

William Jakrapatr's work has always flirted with emotional manipulation, but here it crosses into something more troubling: the wholesale commercialization of grief. These paintings don't invite us to share in genuine loss—they demand that we purchase it, own it, hang it on our walls as evidence of our own capacity for feeling.

The centerpiece portrait of the artist's mother is particularly problematic. Jakrapatr has spoken extensively about his mental health journey, his therapy, his medication. One wonders if this transparency is healing—or marketing. The prices these pieces are commanding suggest the latter.

In an art world hungry for authenticity, "Absence & Light" delivers something that looks like authenticity but functions like product. This is performative trauma, packaged for consumption by collectors who want to feel like they're buying

something meaningful rather than simply acquiring another status symbol.

The exhibition succeeds as commerce. As art, it is an elaborate exercise in emotional manipulation.

I set down the phone.

William was still sitting on the floor, his expression blank in a way that terrified me. I recognized that blankness. I'd seen it during our early sessions—the particular stillness of someone who was retreating so far inside themselves that the outer world became distant and muffled.

"William." I crouched down in front of him. "Look at me."

He didn't respond.

"William. Look at me. Breathe."

His eyes finally focused, finding my face.

"They said I was selling my grief." His voice was barely audible. "Packaging it for consumption."

"One critic's opinion. Not truth."

"What if they're right?"

I took his hands. They were cold, trembling slightly.

"Then you'd be in good company. Every artist who's ever been honest has been accused of exploitation. Frida Kahlo painted her pain and was called self-obsessed. Van Gogh poured his mental illness into his work and was called mad. Being honest about struggle is always going to make some people uncomfortable. That discomfort is their problem, not proof of your failure."

"You don't understand." He was shaking now, the tremors working their way through his whole body. "What if I am exploiting it? What if this whole thing—the exhibition, the speeches, the openness about therapy—what if it's all just another performance? What if I don't actually know how to be genuine anymore?"

"William—"

"I spent three years hiding. Three years convincing myself that isolation was safety, that no one could hurt me if I never let them in. And then I came out, and I made this exhibition, and I told myself it was about healing. But what if it was just another kind of hiding? What if honesty became another mask?"

His breathing was getting faster, shallower. I recognized the signs—the escalating spiral, the thoughts feeding into anxiety feeding into more thoughts. He was

heading toward a full panic attack, right here in the gallery's back hallway.

"Okay," I said, keeping my voice calm. "Okay. We're going to breathe. Together. Can you do that?"

"I don't—I can't—"

"Yes, you can. You've done this before. In for four, hold for four, out for four. You know how."

I started the count, slow and steady, letting my voice anchor him.

"In... two... three... four..."

He followed, gasping at first, then gradually steadying.

"Hold... two... three... four..."

His eyes stayed locked on mine, using me as a focal point.

"Out... two... three... four..."

We repeated the cycle—three times, four times, five. The trembling slowly subsided. The color began returning to his face. The distant, disconnected look in his eyes was replaced by something more present.

"Better?" I asked.

"Better." He let out a long breath. "That was—I haven't—not in a while."

"You almost had a panic attack in a public gallery. That qualifies as 'a while' worth noting."

"It's been months. I thought—I thought I was past this."

"Healing isn't linear." I was still holding his hands. I should probably let go. I didn't.

"You had a setback. A bad review triggered old patterns. That doesn't mean all your progress is erased."

"How do you know?"

"Because I've been there. Different circumstances, same spiral." I squeezed his hands gently. "The difference is you didn't do what you would have done a year ago. You didn't run. You didn't isolate. You—well, you're sitting on a hallway floor, which isn't ideal, but you're here. Present. Working through it instead of disappearing."

William stared at me. "You really believe that?"

"I really believe that."

A long moment passed. The sounds of the press event filtered through from the main gallery—distant voices, camera clicks, the particular murmur of people analyzing art they didn't fully understand.

"I should go back," William said finally. "They'll be looking for me."

"You don't have to."

"I know. But—" He took another breath. "I want to. Not because I'm okay, but because leaving now means the review wins. And I don't want it to win."

I helped him to his feet. His hand lingered in mine for a moment longer than necessary before he let go.

"Thank you," he said. "For—this. For being here."

"It's my job."

"Is that all it is?"

The question hung between us, weighted with everything we hadn't said.

"No," I admitted. "It's not all it is."

The rest of the press event passed in a blur.

William returned to his duties—the interviews, the photographs, the endless circulation through crowds of people who wanted pieces of him. But something was different now. I could see it in the set of his shoulders, the quality of his smile. He was still performing, but the performance was more deliberate. More chosen.

Every so often, his eyes would find mine across the room. Just for a moment. Just long enough to confirm that I was still there, still watching, still present.

I photographed it all.

But I was also just—there. Witnessing. Being the anchor he could look to when the waters got rough.

When the event finally wound down and the journalists began to disperse, I found William on the small balcony overlooking the street. The same balcony where we'd had our first real conversation after the exhibition opening. The same view of Bangkok's nighttime glitter.

"Hey." I said, stepping out to join him.



"Hey." He didn't turn around. "Thanks for staying."

"Did you think I'd leave?"

"I didn't know. Part of me expected—" He stopped. Started again. "Old patterns. People leaving when things get hard. That's what I'm used to."

"I'm not leaving."

He turned then, finally meeting my eyes. The professional mask was gone. What remained was exhaustion and something else—vulnerability, maybe. Hope.

"Was it okay?" he asked. "The rest of the event. I couldn't tell."

"You were honest. That's different from okay."

"You keep saying that. Honest versus beautiful. Honest versus okay."

"Because it matters." I moved to stand beside him at the railing. "Being honest is harder than being good. Good is a performance. Honest is—everything you showed them today. The speech about mental health. The acknowledgment that healing isn't linear. The refusal to hide your humanity just because someone with a recorder wanted to see you break."

"I almost did break."

"Almost isn't breaking. Almost is being human and surviving anyway."

He was quiet for a long moment, processing this. "The review said I was exploiting my trauma," he said finally. "That I was selling my grief for commercial gain."

"The review was written by someone who's never created anything honest in their life. It's easy to criticize vulnerability when you've never been vulnerable."

"You really believe that?"

"I've been photographing your work for weeks. I've watched people stand in front of your mother's portrait and cry—not because they're being manipulated, but because they recognize something true. That's not exploitation. That's connection."

William turned to face me fully. In the dim light of the balcony, his features were softened, the sharp edges smoothed by shadow.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yes."

"What are we doing? You and me. What is this?"

The question I'd been avoiding. The definition problem that had been lurking

beneath every conversation, every text, every moment of charged eye contact.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I know what it was—a professional relationship. I know what it became—something else. But what it is now? I don't have a word for it."

"Friends?"

"More than friends, I think. But less than—" I stopped, unsure how to complete the sentence.

"Less than what we might become?"

"Maybe. Yes."

William nodded slowly. "I want to move faster. Every instinct I have says to stop being careful, to stop analyzing, to just—let this happen. But I'm also terrified that moving faster means repeating old patterns. That I'll overwhelm you the way I overwhelmed everyone else."

"What patterns?"

"The intensity. The need. The way I used to consume the people I cared about, demanded too much too quickly, couldn't pace myself because patience felt like dying." He laughed slightly, without humor. "I'm better now. Supposedly. But some days I wonder if 'better' just means 'hiding it better.'"

I understood what he was saying. Understood it in my bones, because I'd been wrestling with the same fears.

"I have the same worry," I said. "That this is just another storm I'm chasing. That I'm falling into old patterns disguised as new feelings. That the reason I feel so drawn to you is precisely because you're complicated, and complicated is what I've always been addicted to."

"So we're both afraid we're doing this wrong."

"Pretty much."

"That's... oddly comforting."

"Is it?"

"It means we're both paying attention. Both trying to do this differently." He turned back toward the city view. "My therapist says that awareness is the first step. That recognizing patterns is how you break them."

"My therapist says the same thing. Different words, same concept."

"So we're aware. We recognize the patterns. Now what?"

"Now we—" I hesitated. "Now we keep going. Keep being honest. Keep checking in with ourselves about whether this feels healthy or destructive. Keep communicating instead of assuming."

"That sounds exhausting."

"It is exhausting. But it's also—" I searched for the word. "Different. New. Not the way either of us has done relationships before."

William was quiet, considering this.

"The exhibition ends in two weeks," he said finally. "After that, we won't have professional reasons to see each other. No documentation to do. No events to attend."

"I know."

"Do you want to keep seeing me? After?"

The question was direct. Vulnerable in a way that made my chest ache.

"Yes," I said. "I want to keep seeing you. Not because of the exhibition. Not because of the photography. Because—"

I stopped. Made myself say it.

"Because I like who you're becoming. And I like who I'm becoming when I'm around you. And I want to see what happens if we keep choosing this, instead of just falling into it."

His smile was genuine—the first real smile I'd seen from him all day.

"Choosing instead of falling," he repeated. "I like that."

"It's something my therapist said."

"Both our therapists should get credit for this relationship. If it becomes a relationship."

"They should collaborate on a book. 'How to Help Damaged People Find Each Other Without Destroying Everything.'"

"Best-seller material, definitely."

We stood there in the darkness, looking out at the city, the tension between us transforming into something else. Something quieter. More sustainable.

Then William reached out and put his hand on my arm.

It was a small gesture—the same one I'd been using with him for weeks, the touch

that said I'm here without demanding more. But coming from him, it felt different. Like a declaration. Like a choice.

"Thank you," he said softly. "For everything. The photos. The—being here."

"It's my job."

"That's not all it is."

"No," I agreed. "It's not."

His hand stayed on my arm for another moment. Then he let go, and we were two separate people again, standing on a balcony above a city that didn't know anything about us.

But we knew.

And for now, that was enough.

I didn't tell him about the email.

The thought occurred to me—standing on that balcony, in the aftermath of honesty, with the question of what are we still hanging in the air between us. It would have been the moment for complete transparency. For laying everything out, including the opportunity that had been sitting in my inbox for weeks, growing heavier with each passing day.

But I didn't.

Partly because I still didn't know what I wanted to say. Partly because the night had already been heavy enough with vulnerability, and adding more felt unfair. And partly—mostly—because telling him would make the decision more complicated, and I needed it to be simpler.

This wasn't about William. That's what I kept telling myself. This was about me—about what I wanted for my life, about the dreams I'd been carrying since I was a teenager with a borrowed camera. If I made the decision based on how it would affect us, I'd never make a decision at all. I'd be defining myself in relation to him, which was exactly what I'd been trying not to do.

But not telling him felt wrong too.

I went home that night with the weight of the secret pressing against my chest. The apartment was quiet, the resurrection plant doing its patient work in the window light, the painting of my hands still sitting on its small table.

My laptop was still open to the email from Nut.

Ten days had become eight.

I sat down and stared at the screen, trying to organize my thoughts.

Pro:

- This is the dream
- Travel, photography, seeing the world
- Career-making opportunity
- Proof I can do more than document other people's art
- Financial stability
- Professional recognition

Con:

- Three months away
- This thing with William is just starting
- What if it can't survive the distance?
- What if I'm running away instead of choosing?
- What if the dream isn't worth what it costs?

The lists didn't help. They never helped. I was a visual person, not a linear thinker—I processed the world through images, not bullet points.

I picked up my camera and scrolled through the photos from tonight. There were dozens of them. The press event. The crowds. William doing interviews. William in front of his mother's portrait. William looking exhausted, then composed, then exhausted again. And then there were the others. The ones I hadn't consciously taken.

William's hands, gesturing as he spoke.

William's profile against the gallery lights.

William looking at me across the room, his expression unguarded for just a moment.

I was doing it again. Making him the center of my lens. Finding beauty in his face when I should have been capturing the world.

But was that wrong?

Dr. Siriporn's words echoed in my mind: Has it occurred to you that choosing

yourself might also mean choosing to be with someone?

What if choosing the dream and choosing William weren't opposites? What if there was a version of this where I could have both?

I opened a new email and started typing:

Nut,

I'm still thinking about the opportunity. But I have questions. Is the timeline flexible at all? Are there options for shorter contracts, or starting later?

I'm not saying no. I'm just trying to understand all the possibilities before I decide.

And—this needs to stay between us. For now. Please.

Est

I hit send and closed the laptop.

It wasn't a decision. But it was a step toward one.

And maybe that was all I could manage tonight.

My phone buzzed at 1 AM. I was still awake—too wired to sleep, too exhausted to do anything productive—lying on my bed and staring at the ceiling with the particular attention of someone who was very much not okay.

William: Are you awake?

Est: Unfortunately.

William: Can I call you?

I answered on the first ring.

"Hey." I said.

"Hey." His voice was rough, like he'd been sleeping and woken up. "I couldn't stop thinking about tonight. About what we talked about."

"Neither could I."

"I keep replaying the review. The words. 'Performative trauma.' 'Emotional manipulation.'" He laughed slightly. "My therapist is going to have a field day with this one."

"When's your next session?"

"Tomorrow. Dr. Chaisri moved some things around when I texted him about what happened."

"That's good. That you reached out."

"Old me would have gone silent for a week. Would have convinced myself that silence was easier than vulnerability." A pause. "New me apparently sends late-night texts to photographers he's not-quite-dating."

"Is that what we're doing? Not-quite-dating?"

"I don't know what we're doing. But I like it. Whatever it is."

I rolled onto my side, cradling the phone against my ear. "I like it too."

"Est, I need to tell you something."

"Okay."

"My father called today. Before the press event. That's part of why I was already off-balance when the review hit."

"What did he want?"

"He wants to meet. To talk. He said—" William's voice wavered. "He said his wife is pregnant. He's going to have another child. And he wants me to be involved. To be a brother."

I didn't know what to say. The complexity of the situation—estranged father, new family, the particular pain of being replaced and then invited back—was beyond any simple response.

"How do you feel about that?"

"I don't know. Angry, I think. That he gets to start over with a new family when I'm still trying to recover from the first one. But also—" He stopped. "Also maybe hopeful? Like maybe this is a chance for something different. A relationship that isn't defined by old wounds."

"Both of those things can be true."

"That's what I'm learning. That feelings aren't exclusive. That you can be angry and hopeful and sad and grateful all at the same time."

"Therapy's been good for you."

"Therapy's been essential." He laughed softly. "I used to think I was too broken to fix. Now I think maybe 'broken' was never the right word. More like—in need of reassembly. Still all the same pieces, just arranged differently."

"That's a good metaphor."

"I had a lot of time to think while I was hiding. Some of it was useful."

We were quiet for a moment. The kind of silence that felt comfortable—two people existing together through a phone line, not needing to fill every moment with words.

"Est?"

"Yeah?"

"What happens when the exhibition ends? What do we become?"

The question I'd been asking myself for weeks. The question I still didn't have an answer to.

"I don't know," I admitted. "But I think—I think we become whatever we choose to become. Not defined by circumstance, but by decision."

"Choosing instead of falling."

"Yeah."

Another silence. Then:

"I want to choose you," William said softly. "I know that's probably too much to say. Too fast. But I've spent three years not saying things, and I'm trying to be different now. So—I want to choose you. Even if I don't know what that means yet. Even if we're still figuring it out."

My chest was tight. Full of something I couldn't name.

"I want to choose you too," I said. "But—"

"But?"

I thought about the email. The opportunity. The dream that was still sitting in my inbox, waiting for an answer I couldn't give.

"But I'm scared," I finished. "Of doing this wrong. Of falling into old patterns. Of losing myself in you the way I've lost myself in people before."

"I'm scared too. Of hurting you. Of being too much. Of watching you walk away because I couldn't control my own damage."

"So we're both scared."

"We're both scared. But we're also both here. Talking. Being honest about the fear instead of hiding from it."



"That's different from before."

"It's different from everything before." His voice was warm despite the late hour. "I think that's why it might work. Because we're not pretending. We're just—present. Messy and uncertain but present."

I closed my eyes, letting his words wash over me.

"We should sleep," I said finally. "You have therapy tomorrow."

"I know. I just—I needed to hear your voice. After everything today. I needed to know you were still there."

"I'm still here."

"Good." A pause. "Goodnight, Est."

"Goodnight, William."

I hung up and set down my phone.

The ceiling stared back at me, unchanged. The resurrection plant continued its patient work. The painting of my hands continued to exist, evidence of attention I still didn't fully understand. And somewhere in my inbox, the email waited. The dream. The choice I still had to make.

Eight days.

I didn't know what I was going to do. Didn't know if I could have both things, or if choosing one meant losing the other. Didn't know if the fragile thing we were building could survive three months of distance, or if it would wither without constant care like an under-watered plant.

But I knew one thing: I wasn't going to decide tonight.

Tonight, I was going to lie here and think about William's voice saying I want to choose you. About the feel of his hand on my arm. About the way he'd looked at me across the gallery, finding me again and again like I was a fixed point in a chaotic world.

Tonight, I was going to let myself feel this. Whatever this was.

Tomorrow, I would think about choices.

Tonight, I would just be here.

Present.

Uncertain.

Alive.

Nut's response came at 8 AM.

Nut: I asked about flexibility. Here's what they said:

Nut: The core tour is non-negotiable—they need consistent documentation across all dates.

Nut: BUT there's an option for a "featured photographer" role instead of primary. Shorter commitment (6 weeks instead of 3 months), focused on specific locations (Japan and Korea only).

Nut: Lower day rate, but still significant.

Nut: Same deadline applies. Decision needed within the next week.

Nut: Whatever you decide, I support you. You know that.

Six weeks.

Still a long time. But not three months. Not the endless stretch I'd been imagining.

Could the thing with William survive six weeks?

Could I survive six weeks—six weeks of finally living the dream I'd been carrying since I was a teenager, of seeing places I'd only seen in photographs, of becoming the kind of photographer I'd always wanted to be?

The questions spiraled. But they felt different now. Less impossible.

I got up and made coffee. Watered the resurrection plant. Looked at the painting of my hands and thought about the man who'd created it—the attention he'd paid, the care he'd taken, the love he'd poured into oil and canvas because he couldn't say it any other way.

He was choosing me. He'd said so. Late at night, when the masks came down and the truth came out.

What was I choosing?

I picked up my phone and started typing a message to William.

Then I stopped.

Not yet. Not until I knew what I wanted to say. Not until I understood what I was

choosing, and why, and whether the choice was about him or about me or about both.

I had a week.

A week to figure out if the dream and the love could coexist. A week to decide if I was running toward something or away from something. A week to understand, finally, what choosing myself actually meant.

The apartment was quiet around me. The morning light fell across my desk, illuminating the camera equipment waiting to be used, the laptop waiting to be opened, the life waiting to be lived.

I had work to do today. More documentation of the exhibition. More photographs of William's art and the people who came to see it. And somewhere in between the work, I would think. I would process. I would try to find the answer to a question that might not have a right answer at all.

Six weeks.

Japan and Korea.

The dream I'd been carrying for years.

And William, waiting at the other end of it, choosing me while I tried to figure out how to choose myself.

I put down my phone and picked up my camera.

One step at a time.

One day at a time.

One choice at a time.